NDAD’S MISSION
Enhance the quality of lives of individuals facing health challenges.

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Over 20 years of offering water recreation fun for people with disabilities, NDAD and partners adapt

By Mike Brue

The first year proved a bit of an adventure, to put it mildly.

It was the summer of 1994. The North Dakota Association for the Disabled decided to embark on a new physical activity for people with disabilities, particularly those who routinely use wheelchairs.

The activity? Waterskiing.

NDAD’s partners in the endeavor, Texas Adaptive Aquatics of Houston, Texas, had flown four people to Grand Forks, along with special adaptive ski equipment crated in “huge, coffin-looking boxes” – equipment that was necessary to bring life to the North Dakota debut of this new organized activity, NDAD President/CEO Ron Gibbens recalls.

The inaugural event had no name. It later became an “Adaptive Skiing Extravaganza” before the event’s ultimate title -- “Escape to the Lake” -- was adopted.

Devils Lake in northeast North Dakota was chosen for the debut of a single-day adaptive water recreation clinic. The lake was in the early stages of what would become years of flooding, “with lots of fresh, cold water coming in” with those rising waters, Gibbens recalled.

Four people with disabling conditions showed up for this inaugural event. The turnout was disappointing, especially considering the son of NDAD’s founders and one of his cousins, Brent Grondahl, were two of those four. A teen girl was the third, and a UND student from Asia the fourth.

Still, it was a start. The event had just about everything it needed to get started. Just about.

“We didn’t have a boat lined up,” Ron Gibbens recalled, chuckling.

“We went to downtown Devils Lake. Devils Lake Glass & Paint, I think, was the name of the store. They actually sold boats there. Well, one guy said, ‘My boat is sitting at the dock over by my lot, by Woodland Resort. The key’s in it. Just go ahead and take it.’ So we did.”

Gibbens laughed at the memory. “The guys from Houston couldn’t believe it. They said there’d be 10 padlocks on that thing in Houston.”

Credit to Mike Gibbens

Ron and Faye Gibbens’ son, Mike, who has cerebral palsy and was in his mid-20s, was looking forward to this day. In the family’s backyard pool during his youth, he used water wings to help keep his head above water. He did not fear water.

He was no newcomer to adaptive waterskiing, either.

Two years earlier, Mike watched a video-taped newscast, sent to him by a friend, about an adaptive ski clinic held by Texas Adaptive Aquatics in Houston. Mike asked his parents to let him go south with a caregiver. Ron and Faye Gibbens were reluctant.

“Never having seen this, we thought it might be pretty dangerous, of course. “We really didn’t agree at first, but eventually we did,” Ron Gibbens recalled.

“But we did sit near the phone literally waiting to get a call that he had been found on the bottom of Lake Galveston or something.”

The NDAD president and CEO chuckled about that long-ago nervousness. “Not quite that bad, actually, but not being there was really hard, you know.”

Then Faye and Ron Gibbens received a phone call.

It was Mike. “He called after he skied that afternoon, all excited about how great it was,” Ron recalled.

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“And when he got home, he started talking about it. He said we’ve got to bring those guys up here and show other people (and) have other people experience it.”

So, a few years later, there they were, with others from NDAD and the Texas Adaptive Aquatics crew, all gathered at Creel Bay’s Lakewood boat landing near Lakewood Park – with a borrowed boat en route.

It wasn’t long before Faye and Ron Gibbens finally got to see their son waterskiing around the bay.

“It was an emotional experience to see Mike do something that you thought he’d never be able to accomplish. Just a lot of tears from both of us,” Ron recalled.

Their experience that day convinced the NDAD co-founders they were on to something good – with conditions.

While the number of participants that first year had been less than they had hoped, it didn’t help future prospects that no one NDAD contacted in the local news media turned out to cover its clearly distinct event, either for print or video.

“We didn’t do a very good job of getting the word out, for sure,” Ron Gibbens recalled. Or, he theorized, “maybe people were just too reluctant” to try it.

“I think we had to decide . . . whether it was something we wanted to continue and just try to grow it, because it should have been well attended.

“And we immediately started looking for a different lake, because in addition to the temperature, we were concerned about debris in the water.

“As the lake was coming up, it was carrying logs and all kinds of stuff around out there.”

NDAD moved the event to Red Willow Lake, near Binford, N.D. – a smaller lake, but “still very cold,” Ron Gibbens said, chuckling.

“I remember we borrowed a boat from another cabin owner out there, too,” Gibbens recalled. “But we had it lined up at least a day ahead of time.”

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(Nelson Lake boost

Escape to the Lake took off in participation, volunteers and media coverage with the subsequent relocation to southwest North Dakota’s Nelson Lake.

Located in eastern Oliver County, Nelson Lake has water that is heated by an adjacent coal-fueled electric generating plant known as Milton R. Young Station.

Darrell Farland of Bismarck, then an NDAD board member, first suggested Nelson Lake. In addition to the heated water – favorable for participants with muscle spasticity challenges – it also offered a boat launch, on-site camping opportunities and a drive of less than an hour from one of the state’s largest metro areas in Bismarck and neighboring Mandan.

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“We had a better turnout to begin with, and it was obvious the warm water was really ideal for the participants,” Gibbens recalled. “It’s hard for the volunteers. You know, they’re out in that water all day.”

Several Bismarck news media outlets provided the type of news coverage lacking during Escape’s eastern North Dakota events, Ron Gibbens said. With that additional exposure, Escape’s visibility and subsequent participation improved significantly.

Members of Texas Adaptive Aquatics originally served as the side skiers who provided on-water safety support to skiers with disabilities during the earliest years of the event. Some family members of NDAD employees also have helped in that capacity.

“The Texans are very safety conscious,” said Gibbens, emphasizing the work of Texas Adaptive Aquatics’ remaining original participants, Roger Randall and Red Ross. That emphasis throughout the North Dakota program’s history continues today, Gibbens said, “and that I’m sure is a lot of the reason that we’ve had good fortune and not a lot of problems out on the water.”

For a time, NDAD recruited helpful side-skier assistance and ski boats for use from the Prior Lake (Minn.) Water Ski Association and, before that, a water ski organization from the Lake Metigoshe, N.D., area, Club de Skinautique.

For about a decade, those roles have been filled by members of the Aberdeen (S.D.) Aqua Addicts performance ski team.

More than 45 Aqua Addicts skiers and family members were part of this year’s 20th Escape event. The Addicts continue another Escape tradition by treating participants, family members, friends and other Escape volunteers to an early afternoon ski show.

Bryan Stastny is a longtime Escape volunteer who’s driven one of several two-passenger personal watercraft used to provide quick additional support for each skiing trip around Nelson Lake. The husband of NDAD’s client services director, Leslie Stastny, Bryan learned in the early 2000s about the Aqua Addicts while doing some work in South Dakota. Subsequently, two Aqua Addicts members ended up bringing boats to Nelson Lake for Escape and were so impressed that many more members came to help the following year.

Escape to the Lake’s switch to Nelson Lake Recreation Area also led to a partnership with Sporting Chance of North Dakota. The Bismarck-based group, formed in 1995, works to provide hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation activities for people with disabilities.

This year, for example, Sporting Chance’s volunteer contingent, plus its pontoon accessible to wheelchairs and its new Nelson Lake shelter, which was used for Escape’s catered luncheon, were key event components.

After years of these on-site participating partners working together, Escape has become “way more streamlined,” said Leslie Stastny, who also coordinates the annual Escape.

“That comes with having the same ski team and with having the same people involved for so long. Now people know what to do and how long it takes.”

“And another thing: I think there are more and more repeat skiers,” added Jeri Hietala, NDAD’s Grand Forks client services representative who has attended all but one of the 20 Escape events. “The Texans take one look at them and they know” — she snapped her fingers — “they’ve worked with them and, I mean, they know the proper adaptive ski equipment these repeat skiers need. In the beginning, it was a whole different thing.”

Gibbens believes that improved efficiency is one of the key reasons for Escape’s continued success, “in addition to the fact that it’s a unique event that people

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aren’t going to get to
experience anywhere
else -- at least around
this area.”

Other sponsors’ con-
tributions have
helped fuel Escape’s
success.

Revolutions Power
Sports in Grand
Forks provides per-
sonal watercraft each
year which help pro-
vide additional skier
safety support.

Valuable financial
support has come
from other sources
that include Basin
Electric Power Co-
operative and MDU Resources Foundation.

Escape has evolved in other ways. Its popularity at
Nelson Lake quickly led to event expansion in the
latter 1990s to both weekend days. That eventually
was returned to a Saturday-only event.

“Most (skiers) on Sundays were repeats — not all of
them, but most. And then a lot of times they would-
n’t show up” after being scheduled to return Sunday
to ski, NDAD’s Stastny explained. That, plus lim-
ited access to sufficient numbers of volunteers on
Sundays, led NDAD to make it a one-day event.

Thanks to in-
creased effi-
ciency and fa-
miliarity, the
one-day event
works well, even though
it’s a full, busy
day.

One of the days
during a two-
day Escape
weekend were
canceled on
two occasions.

“One year we had to cancel the second day because
of fog. You couldn’t see the lake. There was cool
air, and the warm water hitting that, it was so foggy
you couldn’t see anything,” Ron Gibbens said.

Another year, one of the days stopped abruptly
when a severe storm moved into the area.

Only one year since its debut — 2006 — has Es-
cape to the Lake not been held at all. A temporary
downturn in NDAD revenue caused
it, officials say.

The 2014 event on June 21 drew 39 skiers and mem-
ers of their families, plus friends and oth-
er supporters. The event has drawn as
many as 50 skiers, plus others who
don’t ski but take
part in the day’s pon-
toon rides and other
activities.

His son, Mike, con-
tinues to take part
every year, though
he’s stopped skiing.

“I know he feels a
real sense of pride
that he discovered
this,” Ron Gibbens
said. “He’s really
the one responsible for
bringing it up here.
So, seeing so many
people taking part makes him feel good.”

That includes watching Brent Grondahl of Maddock,
the same cousin Mike skied with at the inaugural
event back in 1994. Brent continues to enjoy trips
around the lake each year. He’s another reminder of
how far Escape has come over 21 years.

“To me,” Ron Gibbens said, “the biggest thing in my
memory of the waterskiing is watching families --
just the emotional experience that it is for them to
have their family member out on the water doing
something like that."

Mike Gibbens’ dad says he “absolutely” can relate.

Call (800) 532-NDAD to learn about plans for the
next Escape to the Lake, set for June 2015.

Brent Grondahl of Maddock, N.D., skis with two Aberdeen
Aqua Addicts side skiers June 21 at Nelson Lake. Grondahl
was one of four adaptive waterski participants at the in-
augural NDAD-organized event in 1994. Brent since has
been a regular participant.

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assistive devices for people with disabilities —
from home aids to accessible vans. Learn more
about the program by calling NDAD at (800)
532-NDAD today.

“Escape to the Lake
continues to be “just
another example that,
with a little bit of
ingenuity and thinking
things through, just about
anything is possible for
people with disabilities,”
NDAD President Ron
Gibbens said.

Need a financial loan?
Eric Kersey can’t tell you what he thinks about waterskiing at this year’s annual Escape to the Lake organized by NDAD, or about the five or so times he’s skied at Escape before.

“Eric doesn’t talk, so he can’t communicate that way,” Gail Hoff said in June 2013 after watching her brother partake in adaptive waterskiing on North Dakota’s Nelson Lake.

“But you can hear him squealing across the lake. You can hear him yelling when he’s out of the water. You very much know by the sounds that he makes that he’s having a good time. He loves it out here.”

Eric, 17, is blind. He can neither walk nor talk, and he’s unable to grip anything. He can hear, though, and he’s soothed by music.

At 4 months old, Eric was a shaken baby.

The circumstance was so violent “that it tore the retina nerves loose from his eyes and his brain began to bleed,” Vernon Kersey said. “He’s just absolutely, totally dependent. That’s one of the big reasons we just took him in our heart and took care of him.”

Kersey and his wife, Cleo, who have been married 60 years, are certainly experienced parents. They have six of their own and cared for roughly 200 more during a quarter-century span as foster parents. They also adopted two children. Eric, the second to be adopted, is “the last one in the house,” Vernon said.

He came to the Kerseys as a foster child at 5 months of age, Cleo Kersey said: “Once we had him home, we just fell in love with him.”

A few years later, the Kerseys adopted little Eric. It was one of the biggest decisions they’ve made in their lives. “We knew we were going to spend an awful lot of time with him” for his daily care, recalled Vernon, who’s retired after teaching in Bismarck State College’s power plant technology program for 23 years.

Eric long since has been “a definite part of our family,” Vernon said.

“It’s just a great experience. He gives us a reason to get up in the morning and be alive. Our kids tell us it makes us young,” Cleo said, chuckling at the thought. “I don’t know about that.”

The first time the Kerseys brought Eric to Escape, they quickly realized that their son, “out on that lake, he’s just different,” Vernon recalled. “You can just see that he enjoys it. . . . He just squeals. He really is happy about the water flopping in his face.”

Vernon paused. “It just does a guy’s heart some good just to watch him.”

Eric’s father “was pretty nervous about it until after I found out how well they took care of him,” he said. “Those people knew their jobs. . . . I can’t say enough good things about those people.”

The whole Escape experience makes for “a really nice day for us,” Vernon said. And Eric’s sister Gail calls the event “one of the most wonderful experiences” she and her children take in each year. They enjoy the event’s camaraderie, too, she said.

You’ll get no argument from Eric at Escape. Just squeals of delight.
Escape helped late NDAD client quench thirst for living
Ray Ganyo dealt with his quadriplegia ‘lot better than I could have,’ mom says

Marlene Dvorak doesn’t recall how Ray Ganyo found out about NDAD’s Escape to the Lake, but she recalls when the fourth-oldest of her five sons told her he would attend.

“I didn’t know anything about it until he told me he was going to take part in it” several years ago, the Grand Forks resident recalled. “I thought, ‘My god, how can you water ski?’”

His reply: ‘Don’t worry, Mom. They’ll figure it out.”

And they did. Twice.

Water recreation was not a common occurrence for Ganyo, a Grafton, N.D., native, even though he learned to swim as a boy and loved time in the water, Dvorak recalled.

Ray was living in Texas as a union tradesman elevator mechanic when water played a role in a life-changing incident. On Good Friday 1981, during a camping trip, he broke his neck after diving off a Guadalupe River bridge near New Braunfels. After several months at the Texas Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Houston, Ray returned to Grafton to live with his mom and resume life — this time as a person with quadriplegia.

And live he did, especially after spending about a year at Courage Center in the Twin Cities area, learning how to function with his extreme disability.

By the time the 52-year-old died suddenly at his Grand Forks home on July 27, 2013 (“He just never woke up that morning,” Marlene said about her son, who also had diabetes), the amiable Ganyo had lived an active, post-accident life.

While caregivers, friends and family certainly provided Ganyo with some assistance, that thirst for living life could come from no one other than himself.

Ray “handled it a whole lot better than I could have,” Marlene reflected. “He was polite or friendly and thanked people for what they did for him. . . . He sometimes became frustrated with his caregivers, though he appreciated what people did for him. . . . He wanted to be independent as much as he could be. He took care of his own business.”

A short list of Ganyo’s accomplishments in the 32 years after his accident included 17 years of attendance at rockin’ Moondance Jam in Minnesota, numerous blues music performances and many UND hockey games. He took multiple deer hunting trips, using a rifle or bow and arrow with adaptive means, and he was successful several times. He traveled to both U.S. coasts and to Hawaii, and took a cruise to Mexico.

Ganyo graduated Cum Laude in 1992 while earning a Bachelor of Science degree from Minneapolis’ Augsburg College, and he received a master’s degree in social work from the University of North Dakota in 2000.

In Grand Forks, he served actively on a special mayor’s committee on employment of people with disabilities. Ray twice received statewide awards that recognized his contributions and achievements as a person with disabilities. “I think it was one of our proudest moments when he was named a state handicapped citizen of the year,” Marlene said.

And, yes, there were those two Escape trips around southwest North Dakota’s Nelson Lake behind a speedboat. In both instances, Ray skied on a two-ski sled while flanked by two performance skiers from the Aberdeen (S.D.) Aqua Addicts, one of Escape’s four on-site participating partners.

Ray’s final Escape ski came in 2013 on the return leg of a trip with his caregiver and Marlene to South Dakota’s Black Hills. “Ray told me there’d be food and there’d be people to help him” at Escape, she recalled. “I had an open mind.”

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The water that June day was particularly choppy. In the lake’s most open water nearer the power plant on Nelson Lake’s south side, wind-swept waves splashed wildly and several times bounced the stout Ganyo and his ski sled aloft.

Back on shore, Ray told an observer that he had fun skiing, rough as it was. The observer asked Ganyo whether the water -- heated by the adjacent power plant -- felt as warm as advertised.

“I don’t know,” he deadpanned, a hint of a smile on his lips. “I can’t feel anything below my neck.”

That June 2013 day came only about six weeks before Ray’s death.

“He loved the water,” Marlene recalled. “I was just happy he was able to do something he enjoyed.”

She believes Ray intended to return for a third ski around Nelson Lake at this year’s 20th Escape.

Ganyo was an NDAD client who received general assistance for Grand Forks’ Dial-A-Ride transportation and to obtain a shower commode chair and other medical equipment.

When Ganyo died, NDAD was one of two nonprofit agencies where memorials in Ray’s name were directed, in lieu of flowers.

NDAD “was always on his list” of contacts if he needed assistance, Dvorak said.

A three-time widow with another son deceased, Marlene wrote a detailed obituary for her son. “I just wanted people to know that just because you have a disability doesn’t mean that you have to quit living.

“Once I asked him, ‘Ray, don’t you feel like crying sometimes?’

“‘Mom, why would I cry? I can’t even wipe my own tears.’”

Ray “just kind of accepted things,” Marlene said.

“I’m sure he did a lot of thinking, and I’m sure on his own he probably thought a lot of things he never said,” Ray’s mother said. “But he wasn’t bitter.

“He wasn’t ‘why me?’ -- that kind of thing. He never said anything like that.”

Ray Ganyo’s mom paused, then quietly offered one more defining observation.

“He lived a good life.”

Helping Others to Help Themselves

NDAD is a nonprofit, charitable organization founded by concerned citizens to assist mentally and physically disadvantaged people in North Dakota, many of whom are not eligible for services from other agencies.

Disabling conditions often are very costly. NDAD was founded on the belief that people with disabilities, when given the opportunity, can live more satisfying, productive lives — and NDAD has helped thousands do just that since its creation in 1975. This often requires the purchase of specialized equipment, medical treatment, or other services.

NDAD provides financial assistance through funds generated by both the organization and community projects. NDAD also provides information and referral services to help people receive assistance through other agencies, when possible.

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